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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ECE REFORM

Note by the Chairman of the Commission on his consultations related to the biennalization of the annual sessions of the Commission

1. In accordance with the decision taken at the 52nd Annual Session, the Group of Experts on the Programme of Work discussed the note prepared by the Executive Secretary on the advisability of the biennalization of the Commission session and the feasibility of moving the date of the annual session from April to November.

2. At the Ad Hoc Informal Meeting of the Commission, held on 6 November 1997, the Chairman of the group of experts reported that the questions included in the note of the Executive Secretary had been twice on the agenda of the group, but no agreement had been reached in the matter. The Ad Hoc Informal Meeting of the Commission had extensively discussed the proposal on biennalization. This meeting indicated that while the majority of member countries was in favour of the concept of biennalization, a number of delegations had serious reservations about the immediate acceptance of the proposal. In the light of this situation the meeting asked the Chairman of the Commission to conduct consultations in the matter.

3. At the end of November and the beginning of December, with the involvement of the other members of the Bureau and the Executive Secretary, I consulted with the representatives of those countries which had expressed reservations about biennalization.

4. At the consultations, the consulted countries showed flexibility and they stated that they did not oppose the concept of biennalization as such. They take the view, however, that the proposal needs further study and refinement and they need more time for the acceptance of the concept. These countries have identified a number of considerations which form the basis of their reservations:

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- At present, the sessions of the Commission provide the only forum where member countries can discuss major developments in the ECE region at high-level. Therefore, if the frequency of the sessions was reduced already from 1998, a year which is expected to be of great importance for European issues, a number of countries could feel that they were deprived of a unique possibility for dialogue with other member states. In that case, the same countries could conclude that biennalization would work against, rather than for strengthening of European cooperation;

- Biennalization would result in looser political and professional controls and monitoring regarding the activities of the Commission and the Secretariat;

- Contacts between ECE and sectoral ministries and other institutions would become less intense; visibility of the Commission would suffer;

- Biennalization would cause a vacuum which could be filled by other international organizations.

5. On 17 December, at an informal meeting, I informed local representatives about the results of the consultations. On behalf of the Bureau, I suggested the following:

- due to the lack of consensus, for the April session no draft resolution should be introduced to the Commission on biennalization;

- at the April session, I would inform the Commission about the consultations and make some proposals on how to continue with the question of biennalization.

6. Based on results of the consultations and the discussion which took place at the December informal meeting I suggest that:

- **the Group of Experts should be asked by the Commission to continue the examination of relevant legal and other aspects of biennalization, taking into account the views expressed during the consultations and should report its finding to the Commission.**

7. In the light of the positions expressed by different delegations in the last months, I take the view that we have good chances for finding an acceptable solution on the question of biennalization. During my consultations I felt that all countries have been convinced that the reform of the ECE requires changes both in format and content of the sessions of the Commission. Support was expressed by many for sessions of the Commission which concentrate on substantive developments in the ECE area giving possibility for all members to express their views on these developments and to have the opportunity to engage in substantial discussion in these matters. "More substance, less housekeeping", was the overwhelming position.

8. Biennalization is not a concept which has been imposed on the ECE. It forms part of the Plan of Action in the areas of budgeting and governance of the organization. Therefore, my personal conviction is that we may find a compromise solution which could include the idea that in every second year the emphasis should be on substantive matters which are of importance to all members, while in "off years", the emphasis should be on organizational matters. In the context of biennalisation, it would be justified to review the existing rules on convening of ad hoc meetings of the Commission with the objective of making them more flexible. The role of the bureau of the Commission and the usefulness of having more frequent informal contacts among delegations and the secretariat should also be examined.